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THE BUDDHIST ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF AMBARAN IN A HISTORICAL RETROSPECT

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Abstract: *This paper seeks to understand the excavated archaeological sites of Ambaran. The commencement of archaeology in Jammu and Kashmir acquainted the world with its rich heritage and culture of the region. Jammu and Kashmir was a cradle of culture in ancient period because it is the land where Kalhana wrote the first historical book of India, Rājatarāṅgini. The exploration of Jammu and Kashmir was started by foreigners in the 19th century. They brought to light many monumental heritage sites that have since attracted the world towards Jammu and Kashmir. From the 20th century onwards, the Archaeological Survey of India became active in the region and explored and excavated many sites of different cultures. The excavation of Ambaran started in 1999.*

Keywords: *Ambaran, Akhnur, Harwan, Pambarwan, Sangrama, Vihara.*

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Introduction

The village of Ambaran is situated near Akhnur on the right bank of river Chenab at a distance of 28 km. north-west of Jammu. The visit of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to this ancient Buddhist site on November 16, 2011 has reaffirmed Ambaran's rich historical and cultural importance. The site of Ambaran had come into prominence in the third decade of the twentieth century when Charles Fabri, the English art historian and then curator of

Lahore Museum (now in Pakistan) found a basket lying in a corner of the museum with no clue to its origin. In it were lying terracotta figurines, Buddha's head, female torsos, draperies of life-size terracotta Buddha figures or monks. He then decided to locate the origin of these terracotta objects. After painstaking investigations, including trips to various places like Baramulla, Srinagar, Harawan, in Kashmir and Akhnur, in Jammu, Fabri finally traced the place from

where these finds originated. This place was Pambarwan hamlet under the village of Ambaran. He named these relics the Akhnur terracotta and explored the area and found fragments and parts of statues of Lord Buddha and female figures, draperies, jewellery, one beautiful and a near-complete head of a woman, and similar in style to heads found in the Lahore museum. Today these sculptures, labelled as Akhnur terracotta are the star collection of classical art of India and located in various national and international museums including Dogra Art Museum in Jammu.

With the objective to establish the nature and sequence of cultural deposits and to understand the link between early historical and Kushana culture, an excavation was carried out at the hamlet Pambarwan at Ambaran (*Indian Archaeology, A Review*, 1999-2000: 52-59). The Ambaran site is famous for earlier yields of the so called Akhnur terracotta heads which are preserved in a number of museums throughout the world. A close resemblance of Akhnur terracotta heads with Gaṇdhāra art and the Gupta art of Madhyadeśa and confusion regarding their dating forced further investigations as the problem had remained unsolved even after small-scale excavation at the site in 1973-74, from where a ceramic industry is represented mainly by a red ware of medium to fine fabric represented by bowls, lids, spouts and vases (*Indian Archaeology, A Review*, 1973-74: 14).

Excavation at Ambaran

Excavation was undertaken in 24 quadrants of squares of 10 x 10 meter each. The thickness of the cultural deposits varies as per the original contours of the site and it was found to be 2.90 meter thick over the natural soil. Burnt brick structures of various phases were encountered in almost all the trenches, (Fig.5.1 -A) which were found damaged mainly due to two reasons – repeated floods in Chenab and unauthorized digging operations in the area in the past. The longer axis of boulders, brought during flash floods and resting at various levels at the site, point towards the course of the

river which suggested receding of flood water after deposition of boulders at the site (*Indian Archaeology, A Review*, 1973-74: 14). The cycles of sand, silt and clay were noticed at several levels in most of the trenches as the site was continuously prone to heavy floods. This is quite clear from the markings of High Flood Level close to the site on masonry column of the incomplete bridge of the river. The site seems to have been abandoned sometimes around the 7th century CE. A preliminary study of the site revealed the cultural sequence of the following periods.

Period I: Pre-Kushana period (2nd century BCE to 1st century BCE)

Period II: Kushana period (1st century - 3rd century CE)

Period III: Post-Kushana (Gupta) period (4th – 5th century CE)

Period IV: Post-Gupta period (6th – 7th century CE)

Period I: Pre-Kushana period (2nd century BCE to first century BCE)

No structural remains of period I was found in Qd 4 over the natural soil in Ambaran.

Pottery

The potteries of Ambaran belong to period I was thin and contained grey ware shards of bowls. Shards of black-slipped ware were found in Qd 4.

Period II: Kushana period (First century CE to 3rd century CE)

An advanced civilization flourished here during the Kushana period. The Kushana Empire was originally formed in the early first century CE under Kujula Kadphises (grandfather of Kanishka) in the territories of what are now northern Afghanistan, Pakistan, and southern Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. During the first and second centuries CE, the Kushana Empire expanded rapidly across the northern part of South Asia as far as Saketa (Ayodhya) and Sarnath near Varanasi. The famous

Kushana ruler Kanishka is renowned in Buddhist tradition for having convened the Fourth Buddhist Council in Kashmir.

Buddhist Monastery and Votive Stupa

A Buddhist monastic establishment belonging to the Kushana period has been found at the site. Beside random rubble, a wall of burnt brick (Fig.5.1-B) masonry with bricks usually measuring 36 x 38 x 24 x 6 to 7 cm. was also unearthed. The structures with a square-like plan with typical Kushana bricks were noticed. The remains of a brick paved pathway were also noticed in front of these structures. They are most probably bases of votive stupas. (Fig.5.1-C)

Antiquities

Among the important antiquities of Period II is a reliquary casket or container for holy relics (Fig.5.1 -D). Its contents are as follows:

- i) Thirty circular thin foils of gold 1.2 cm. to 1.4 cm. in size.
- ii) Two circular foils of silver 2.1 cm. long.
- iii) Beads, among which about one hundred fifty micro beads of pearl, (Fig.5.1 -E) and twelve cylindrical coral beads.
- iv) Two metallic micro-beads, oval shaped silver casket in equal parts 2.5 cm. and 2.3 cm. to fit in each other.
- v) A circular gold casket of equal size diameter 1.5 cm. and 1.4 cm. respectively found inside the silver casket containing small charred pieces of bone with ash and a minute part of tooth. (Fig.5.1 -F)
- vi) Circular gold and silver sheet from reliquary. (Fig.5.1 -G)
- vii) Four full and six broken circular foils of gold. One head made of amethyst, a semi-precious stone ((Mani: 2000: 3-10).

In Buddhism, great stress was laid on the veneration of the stupa in which the mortal remains of Buddha were enshrined. The practice of erecting mounds (*stupa*) over the corporeal

remains of the preachers has a pre-Buddhistic origin seen throughout the world. Around 5th century BCE Buddhist stupas gained definite form and became universal. They may have been erected to commemorate the memory of four categories like Buddha, Pratyekya Buddha, Arahats and Chakravartins or universal monarchs or deities (Chandra: 2002-2003: 135).

Period III: Post-Kushana (Gupta) period (4th – 5th century CE)

Red ware dating to the Gupta period has been found at Ambaran. Gupta Empire was an ancient Indian empire which existed approximately from 320 CE to 550 CE and covered much of the Indian continent. Founded by Maharaja Sri Gupta, the dynasty was the model of a classical civilization. The peace and prosperity created under leadership of Gupta enabled the pursuit of scientific and artist endeavours. This period was marked by extensive inventions and discoveries in science, technology, engineering, art, dialect logic, mathematics astronomy, religion and philosophy. Chandragupta I, Samudragupta and handragupta II were the most notable rulers of the Gupta dynasty. Samudragupta brought the Jammu-Sialkot region under his control in the 4th century CE. Thus, Period III is represented by the cultural sequence of the post-Kushana period.

Structural Remains

Two distinct structural phases of Post-Kushana (Gupta) period were noticed among the brick structures at Ambaran.

- (a) Structures of bricks measuring 27 x 22 x 7 cm. in general.
- (b) Reuse of bricks and brick bats of earlier structures for strengthening the walls which most likely suffered damage due to flash floods in the river Chenab (Chandra: 2002-2003: 135).
- (c) Remains of an entrance of some important complex were found. There was a concentration of terracotta

figurines and their fragments. These were used for decorating the wall, probably the facade of the gate of the monastery. A stone pitched pathway leading towards north and flanked by a brick wall was also noticed. It seems that the entrance was blocked or narrowed during the next phase by putting a wall at the southern end in the pathway, parallel to it at the gate.

- (d) Extensions of walls of the structure of Post-Kushana period were traced. It was noticed that structures of the first phase were given extra support and also repaired at different stages during the second phase and even afterwards it was damaged due to floods. A maximum of thirty one courses of bricks were found, of which the lower twenty one courses belong to phase I and top ten courses to a later phase when the structure was repaired. The lower courses slightly project after three courses each giving the tapering nature to the wall and consist of full bricks while the top ten courses do not follow the same principle and were the outcome of the repairs carried out in the second phase or during period IV when brick and brick bats were utilized to maintain the height of the structure in a haphazard manner. A few decorated bricks were also found reused for the repairs.

A rectangular structure with its walls having a width of 70 cm. was exposed towards west of the large structure of period II. From the floor of the rectangular structure, chunks of lime-plaster were found laying upside down, possibly the remains of fallen stucco ceiling which was painted with red strips.

The stucco figure technique first originated in Alexandria and travelled to north-western India via Iran where this was used in the late Hellenistic period as an inexpensive substitute for marble. Rowland is of opinion that it was the Sassanian

invasion of CE 242 which was solely responsible for the introduction of stucco-technique all over the north-west frontier of the Indian sub-continent (Goswami: 1979: 84). The northern wall was found damaged due to unauthorized digging, probably by antique hunters in the past. Overlying the levels of period III, burning activity was also noticed in sealing layers at some spots which is quick distinct in the northern section but it would be too premature to relate it to the invasion and destruction by the Hunas as no other evidence is available in this regard. Some red impressions were also found on clay lamps.

Terracotta

A large number of terracotta human fingers (Fig. 5.1-H) hands, legs, ears torso parts including female figures with breasts covered with a diaphanous upper garment through which the nipples are visible were unearthed. Fragments of torso of the Buddha and of female devotees, with drapery, decorative ornaments having floral and other designs, a fly whisk a headless female deity and one full and some fragmentary relief heads of devotees with open eyelids and elaborate hair dress and ornaments were found (Goswami: 1979: 84). Some of the fingers belong to the life size images while the rest are probably of smaller ones. Shapes of the fingers suggested different postures intended for expression. These terracotta images were perhaps used to embellish the wall of the first phase of Post-Kushana (Gupta) period. Heads are in relief showing profile of the face. These along with other fragments of torso ornaments and drapery bear marks of reinforcement as they were meant to stick to the plaster of the wall.

Period IV: Post-Gupta period (6th – 7th century CE)

Structural Remains

The large complex of a monastery belonging to an earlier period was also found. During period IV additions and alteration were made in its

original structure and repairs were also carried out. Monastery or *Vihara*, i.e. the Buddhist *Sangharama* was primarily intended for the residence of the monks. A monastery in ancient India was designed on much the same lines as a private house, i.e. with a row of cells on the side of an open inner quadrangle (Goswami: 1979: 72). Due to cultivation and un-mindful digging at the site, structures of this period which were nearer to the surface, suffered heavy damages and walls with only one or two courses of brickbats could be found. A square structure which is probably a base of brick pillar was seen, besides supporting walls and partition in structures made during this period.

Ceramics

The ceramic products of the site are in red ware, both with or without slip. From the period I a few pieces of grey ware bowls were found. Pottery of period II to IV does not exhibit much difference in shapes, except that in the last period, edges of bowls became sharp which were thick and curved inwards during the earlier two periods. Important shapes are basins, bowls, sprinklers, vases lids, lamps (Fig.5.2 -A) handled cup, spouts including one with a grotesque animal head, and storage jars stamped with design have also been found from a few areas. Amongst the grotesque an interesting piece bears the head of a lion.

Terracotta

Amongst the important antiquities, are a large number of decorative terracotta figurines (Fig.5.2-B, C, D and E) mentioned earlier, including the left profile of a princely looking male head, a broken terracotta mould showing the bust of a lady wearing a beaded hair ornament with a pendant at the centre, ear pendants, necklace and amulets, two small terracotta grotesque heads, terracotta moulds of leaves and ornaments, terracotta skin rubber, beads and gamesmen, iron nails, hooks and rings, (Fig.5.2 -F). An interesting broken terracotta tablet mould

bears on its different fangs negative impressions of a pendant, fruits and leaves, a bird sitting on a twig having fruit and leaf and a squatting figure of a monkey.

Other finds include a few copper objects, a glass and a stone bead, part of a small stone sculpture in Gupta style showing a male attendant holding some object in his raised right hand and the left resting on his thigh.

Coins

The excavation at Ambaran revealed eight circular copper coins of Kushana and Huna periods. Of these one is eroded. Six belong to the Kushana rulers Soter Megas, Kanishka and Huvishka and one perhaps to Toramana, the Huna ruler (*Indian Archaeology, A Review, 1999-2000: 59*). This Huna coin was found near the pillar base of the monastery. A large numbers of coins had been issued by the Kushana kings. On the obverse appears a bust of the king and on the reverse a large fire altar surmounted by a divine bust. This type is common in the silver coins and small bronze and large copper coins also. The royal figures on a great number of coins are robust, majestic and awe-inspiring. These conveyed the great prowess of the Kushana emperors. The deities on the reverse indicate the syncretistic trends in religious movements and iconographic development (Shrava: 1985:5).

The Hunas were a nomadic tribe, who lived in the neighbourhood of China. Advancing towards the west they became divided into two main branches. One branch under the famous Atilla moved towards the Roman Empire while the other turned their attention towards India. The first Huna invasion took place at a time when the Imperial Guptas had been ruling over a greater part of India in 458 CE. It was repelled by the Gupta emperor Sakandagupta. Next time the Hunas, under the leadership of Toramana, were successful in their Indian campaign and ruled over a vast dominion in India comprising Kashmir, Punjab, Rajputana, Malwa and parts of Uttar Pradesh (Majumdar:

2007:242). The Hunas issued a large number of coins. On the obverse appears the king, standing and pouring oblations at the altar and his name is written vertically in the Brahmi script, under the arm and on reverse is the image of a seated goddess Lakshmi (Bajpai:1976:100). Huna coins are thus quite similar to the coins of the Kushanas and Guptas. After the Harappan period Akhnur was probably used by the Indo-Bactrian-Greek for the purpose of trade, because it was close to Sialkot. But during the Kushana period the area was very important from the point of view of trade. The Buddhist monastery of Akhnur too, came into prominence either during the time of Menander or during the time of the Kushanas. The monastery was destroyed during the Huna invasion. For some thirty years, from CE500 onwards, western India was in the hands of Hunas kings, two of whom, Toramana and his son Mihirkula were apparently mighty monarchs. The latter is remembered by the seventh century Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsang as a fierce persecutor of Buddhism, and in Kashmir, one of the centres of his power, memories of his sadistic tyranny were still alive in the twelfth century, when they were recorded by the historian Kalhana (Basham: 2004:68). However after a gap the monastery again revived its activities during the medieval period because of its importance in relation to trade.

Commercial Activities

Akhnur gained importance during the time of Kushana due to its connection with the valley of Kashmir through the river Chenab (Singh: 1999: 104). The commercial commodities like costus were dropped in that river at the high mountain ridges and were collected at Akhnur for their sale in ports and markets (Singh: 1999: 104). Thus the commodities which were the having good market in Rome were carried to the port of Barygaza (Bharukchhha) from Akhnur mainly through the riverine routes for their further shipping (Singh: 1999: 104). The export of costus was prevalent even in pre-Kushana days. Seleucus is said to

have presented one pound of costus to one of his friends (Singh: 1999: 104). It is therefore evident that before the popularity of Central Asian trade routes the export of such goods was via sea routes (Singh: 1999: 105). The sea route between India and western Asia became very popular at least from the days of the Persian King Darius I when it was navigated by the captain Scylax of Carrianda (Singh: 1999: 105). The theory that one Hippalus of the first century CE discovered the monsoon system and only thereupon there was Indian ocean trade is now treated as 'Roman ethnocentric nonsense' (Curtin: 1984:97). The export of the products of Kashmir hill through the river Chenab was common even in medieval times. The archaeological finding from Ambaran indicates that the region was sustained by a brisk trade, both internal and external and the use of money as medium of exchange, resulting in a flourishing economy during this period.

Illustrations

- Fig. 5.1A View of Trenches of Ambaran Jammu District
- Fig. 5.1B View of Bricks of Ambaran Jammu District
- Fig. 5.1C View of Stupa with Votive Stupa from Ambaran Jammu District
- Fig. 5.1D Reliquary from Ambaran Jammu District
- Fig. 5.1E Micro-Beads of Pearl from Ambaran Jammu District
- Fig. 5.1F Gold and Silver Casket and Charred Bones from Ambaran Jammu District
- Fig. 5.1G Circular Gold and Silver Sheet Reliquary from Ambaran Jammu District
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- Fig.5.2A Lamps from Ambaran Jammu District
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- Fig.5.2D Terracotta Figurines from Ambaran Jammu District
- Fig.5.2E Terracotta Figurines from Ambaran Jammu District
- Fig.5.2F Hooks and Rings from Ambaran Jammu District



A



B



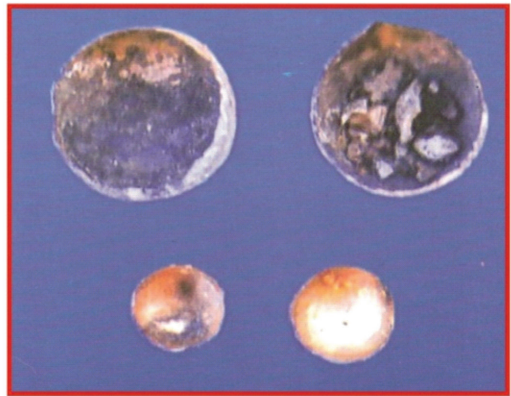
C



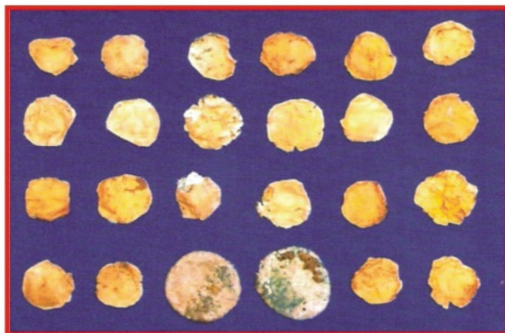
D



E



F



G



H

Fig. 5.1 A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H



A



B



C



D



E



F

Fig. 5.2 A, B, C, D, E, F

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